

The destination within

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ABSTRACT

An old saying claims that the soul takes longer to move than the physical body – or at least that it moves according to other laws. This is felt when travelling in a landscape like the Icelandic one, when our frames of reference have not yet broken in and we find ourselves in limbo, not fully understanding our context. Without our familiar social codes, everyday rhythms and points of orientation, we seem to glide in a strange space-time, an “inbetween”. Thus, new freedom of personal interpretation arises, whether we have prepared ourselves for the voyage or not. Nothing would fully prepare us as we glide into this rare state of being. This heterochronic situation seems to give us the peace to find ourselves in an almost pure state of mind. Can it be that the traveller, being faced with a quantum leap of scale - between the miniscule self in the vast landscape and its powers – is not only faced with the dynamics of the landscape as such, but also, and no less, with herself? This paper argues that in the essence of this extraordinary nature lies a rare possibility of meeting with the one thing that is so miraculously ordinary: Being in itself.

Keywords: Travelling being, rhythmanalysis, landscape, nature-based tourism, Iceland.

ÁGRIP

Áfangastaður hið innra.

Gamalt máltak segir að á ferðalögum sé mikilvægt að staldra reglulega við og bíða eftir sálinni – ferð hennar lúti í öllu falli öðrum lögmálum en ferð líkamans. Íslensk náttúra getur haft sams konar áhrif á ferðalanginn, þegar hversdagsleg viðmiðunargildi hans eru horfin sjónum og hann lendir þannig í einhvers konar millibilsástandi, án getu til að skilja samhengi sitt til fullnustu. Án kunnuglegra áttavita og skilnings á fjarlægðum og samhengi virðist hann svífa í framtíðarýmum. Þar með myndast nýtt frelsi til persónulegrar túlkunar, hvort sem við höfum búið okkur undir ferðalagið eða ekki. Ekkert getur að fullu undirbúið manneskjuna undir þetta einstaka og sjaldgæfa ástand. Þessi upplifun virðist jafnframt bera með sér annars konar tíma og frið fyrir hugann. Getur verið að ferðalangurinn – í þessu stórbrotna skalastökki milli sjálfs sín og hinnar óendanlegu víðáttu landslagsins og krafta þess – horfast ekki eingöngu í augu við mátt landslagsins sjálfs, heldur sé ekkert síður knúin til að horfast í augu við sjálfa sig? Í greininni er því haldið fram að í þessari einstöku náttúru liggja fágætt tækifæri til að komast til fundar við það sem virðist svo hversdagslegt að undrum sætir: Sjálfrið sjálft.

Lykilorð: Sjálfsvera ferðamanns, taktgreining, landslag, náttúrutengd ferðamennska, Ísland.

INTRODUCTION

According to an old saying, when travelling from place to place, one has to sit down at crossroads at a given time interval and wait for the soul to arrive before continuing or settling down.

This saying has repeatedly come to my mind when travelling as a guide with numerous groups of tourists through the tremendously varied sites of Iceland, trying vigorously to balance the satisfaction of the

voyagers – giving them the time needed to enjoy, savour and digest the wonders that meet them – with the often all too busy and rigid schedules that they had agreed to follow prior to arrival. But what did they expect to find in this country – and why are they traveling?

Within the past few decades, the travel industry has become increasingly important to Iceland's economy and the spectrum of

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travel experiences offered seems to be ever increasing (Icelandic Travel Industry Association 2010). But this increase in the numbers of visitors, and the balance of the marketing value of their visits versus the impact on the fragile land, raises many issues. This has sparked a series of debates within local communities and on the national level, concerning the use and marketing of available resources; and to which extent access to resources should be limited due to their fragility and/or scarcity. For the travel industry, it is therefore extremely important to try to get a deeper understanding of the nature of the experience that visitors are looking to find during their voyage.

I often wonder whether those who invite outsiders to the collection of experiences that we could, for simplicity, unify under the brand name “Iceland”, have really grasped its full potential. If we have thoroughly recognized the varied spectrum of the *travelling being*, the fundamental elements of the lived experience that will both justify the visitors’ own voyage and serve as a word-of-mouth illustration of its capacities. Working as a certified tour guide for different tour vendors, I often wondered whether we were sometimes overlooking, misunderstanding or misreading the nature of the visitors’ needs, both in terms of the activities and goods locals were supplying, but principally none the less in terms of the organization of the tours themselves. I will argue in this article that far too much emphasis is put on the quantitative spatial frame of travel, neglecting in some cases the core of the potential qualitative experience; the essence of *travelling being* as such.

THE (POST-/HYPER-)MODERN FRAMEWORK OF SYSTEMS

It is debatable whether we still live in modern times or whether we have moved on to a postmodern, post-postmodern - or even

a hypermodern condition. In any case, few will deny the impact of the multitude of systems that surrounds us, that seem to take primary control of our lives and to which we must succumb for various reasons – in many cases sacrificing our personal needs, making them standardized to benefit the whole as Robert and Shana Parke-Harrison (2000) intriguingly imply (figure 1).

Since modernity, many thinkers have touched upon this issue in their works. Michel Foucault notably addresses it in his writings on panopticism and goes further to imply that modern society is built on a complex system of power through knowledge and discipline, stating that the whole of society is infiltrated with a ‘carceral continuum’ (Foucault 1975).

This omnipresent struggle with ‘the system’ has likewise been extensively treated in literature and cinema, from Kafka to Pallasmaa, Tati to Gilliam. It is for example humorously illustrated in the introductory part of Jamie Uys’ (1981) *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. In the film, the life of an African tribe is described, with its intimate connection to the rhythms of nature. Simultaneously, the audience is introduced to the self-inflicted absurdity of everyday life in a modern ‘civilized’ South-African city:

Civilized man refuses to adapt himself to his environment; instead he adapts his environment to suit him. So he builds cities, roads, vehicles, machinery, and puts up power lines to run his labour-saving devices. But somehow he doesn’t know when to stop. The more he improves his surroundings to make his life easier the more complicated he makes it. So now his children are sentenced to 10-15 years of school just to learn to survive in this complex and hazardous habitat they were born into. And civilized man, who refuses to adapt himself to his natural surroundings, now finds that he has to adapt and readapt every day, and every hour of the day to his self-created environment (Uys 1981).



Figure 1 *Garden of Selves*, from the series *The Architect's Brother*. (Source: ParkeHarrison and ParkeHarrison 2000, reproduced with permission).

Arguably, the Western citizen has become tangled up in a web of latent systems, robbed of her autonomy even before she was born. Her continued participation in society seems somewhat obligatory. The French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre supports this notion in his discussion on time and space, stating that

[w]ith the advent of modernity, time has vanished from the social space. It is recorded solely on measuring-instruments, on clocks, that are isolated and functionally specialized as this time itself. Lived time loses its form and its social interest with the exception, that is, of time spent working. Economic space subordinates time to itself; political space expels it as threatening and dangerous

(to power). The primacy of the economic and above all of the political implies the supremacy of space over time (Lefebvre 1991[1974], 95).

We live in times that claim to celebrate the diversity of individuals. Yet we normalize like never before. Everything in our surroundings is quantitatively knit and weaved into standards, regulative frameworks and schedules. In his writings on rhythm analysis, Henri Lefebvre (2004 [1992]) goes on to define the linear rhythms of modern production frenzy, subordinating the more natural, personal and social rhythms (circular rhythms) under their reign. Our insistence to measure quality of work within the easily measurable frame of time, and to

directly appropriate that frame of time as money, forms the basis of today's Western society – and all too often its morality as well. A contradiction lies in the striving for 'freedom' as the control of spare time that is in reality merely the left-over intervals between the measures of rhythms of production – if we succumb and obey. We hope to gain stability, but pay with our autonomy, subordinating our bodily rhythms to that of the system of production. Could it be that this loss of control over time might be manifesting itself all around us, for example in stress and even in more severe physical and mental illnesses? We seem to be constantly trying to reconcile ourselves with time, the omnipresent clock continuously reminding us of our seemingly hopeless battle for the promised illusion of freedom.

Let us at least assume that the above mentioned malaise might imply that our bodies and minds are having difficulty in coping with the over-structured systems imposed on us by society. Isn't it then natural to feel on some level the urge to protest against the imprisonment of the top-down generated, omnipresent systems of discipline and monotonous rhythms based on the capitalist ideology, building its logic on production and currency?

THE SMOOTHNESS OF SPACE – AND THE EVER-STRIATING OBSERVER

The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari (1987 [1980]) described and defined space according to two conceptual opposites; the *smooth* and the *striated*. In their analysis, striated space is the organized space of, e.g., the city, with systematic planning and a clear orientational quality, originally grounded on the city-state and further developed through modern capitalism. The space very much like any given modern city, the space of a sedentary urbanite, grounded on the wish of the

metropolis to organize and later optimize production, consumption and service for its own citizens; optimal, visual, completely definable and measurable.

At the opposing end, we have the realm of pure nature, unaccountable, haptic, vast, and useless as a base of systemization. This is the space of the ocean or the sand dune in the desert that has its horizons rearranged every instant by the blow of the winds. Obviously, this is also the realm of the lava field in the fog and the vast glacier, in the Icelandic context. This is the realm of intensities, a multi-sensory experience, not easily rationalized – of feeling the cold, tasting the snow and hearing the silence; a space of the haptic, bound through the body, multitudes of possibilities with no clear direction, a space of the event (figure 2).

The condition of space being smooth or striated is, however, based on the subject's context with the environment. The ocean was striated with the help of the stars (and later GPS) to control commerce and transport. But it also refers to logical comprehension, the capabilities of navigation through whatever field of life. Conversely, the over-striated urban tissue of metropolitan cities can transform itself into smooth space from the point of view of a visiting outsider. The two opposing concepts of space – the smooth and the striated – are, however, interdependent and one will always coexist with the other, thus giving meaning to the dynamics of shifting realms, based on the transcendence of perception of the observer.

WHY DO WE TRAVEL?

We could further put Lefebvre's (2004 [1992]) thoughts on rhythmanalysis in context with the above-mentioned opposites, accepting that the personal and social bundles of rhythms manifest themselves in different needs within different societies. But at the same time we could wonder



Figure 2 Smooth space – a space of multi-sensory experience. (Source: Ágústsson 2007, reproduced with permission).

whether the Western urban dweller, being partially subordinate to the modern system of discipline and organization, reaches her limit of striation of time and space in the everyday context and periodically needs a break, a smooth space in time, a leave that allows her to investigate, relax – give in to the tempo of her ‘circular’ natural, social and bodily rhythms.

So why do we travel? Arguably some of us – even all, to some extent – travel in order to rest; both in the contradictory sense of not moving, but simultaneously in the more obvious sense of taking leave from our everyday lives. Could it be that Icelandic tourism often fails in both aspects, by underestimating its own potential and, more gravely, by misunderstanding the needs of its visitors? This aspect of the *travelling being* runs the risk of being neglected or even suppressed *because travel tends to be organized*

using the very principles that we, as travellers, are trying to escape.

In this world of production, consumption and amusement, there seems to be an increasing need for liberation, autonomy, freedom of choice, and last but not least, spirituality. Typically, those of us who are privileged enough to travel in an organized fashion in the first place tend to lead a relatively privileged lifestyle, with food on the table and money to spare, but seem to be severely lacking the most basic thing that allows for spatial liberation – namely time.

THE LIBERATION OF THE NOW IN THE CONTEXT OF TRAVEL

Incidentally, we seem to be highly efficient in re-evaluating the past and planning for the future in our system of things, events and social etiquettes, but longing for the freedom of thought in the peace of the

now, referred to by Lefebvre (2004 [1992], 77) as “appropriated” time:

The time that we shall provisionally name “appropriated” has its own characteristics. Whether normal or exceptional, it is a time that forgets time, during which time no longer counts (and is no longer counted). It arrives or emerges when an activity brings plenitude, whether this activity be banal (an occupation, a piece of work), subtle (meditation, contemplation), spontaneous (a child’s game, or even one for adults) or sophisticated. This activity is in harmony with itself and with the world. It has several traits of self-creation or of a gift rather than of an obligation or an imposition comes from without. It *is* in time: it *is* a time, but does not reflect on it.

So where does Icelandic tourism fit into this? By leaving behind the overly organized field of the *quotidien*, the everyday rhythm of spatial surroundings, the home, the work, the relatives and busy schedule, is it possible to gain liberty? Interestingly, it often seems essential to leave those spatial conditions behind; the grid that is so tightly knit around us. We have to leave in order to get that precious and much needed breath of time, ‘appropriated’ in harmony with itself and with the world.

GLIDING IN THE ZERO-GRAVITY OF THE NOW IN THE LEAP OF SCALES

To prepare for travel in space, astronauts are trained to adjust for the state of weightlessness by flying in specially equipped aircrafts (NASA 2006). During a parabolic dive of the aircraft, the astronauts in training get a moment of mere 25 seconds in simulated weightlessness. In a similar fashion, in the interval between departure from the familiar to the point in time when one’s instincts of orientation kick in again in a new setting – before one gets to know the ways around to the local bar, cathedral or mountain peak – there is a rare moment of gliding in a

state similar to zero-gravity, the moment of the non-savant, evoking the innocence and obligatory humility towards the surroundings: Where am I – and who am I? Who am I without my code of reference, code of language, status, cultural relevance?

The traveller has to use her whole body in these new surroundings. One has to open one’s ears, one’s taste buds, start hearing with the toes and talking with the hands and eyes. This multi-sensory and smooth spatial experience is just as relevant anywhere. However, the farther the new situation is from the everyday, the more substantial is the re-orientation that has to take place, prolonging the stage of gliding in the temporal and spatial state of the question mark.

The Icelandic artist Sigurður Guðmundsson recently published an account of a year spent in introspection and of his efforts of social striation in the vastly populated Ho Chi Minh City (Guðmundsson 2010). Finding himself in the setting of an enormous living city where he was unable to properly orient himself, unable to verbally communicate with other people, and where his social status was partially undefined, he discovered (what he considered to be) true interpersonal communication and a direct route to the self.

Very similar to Guðmundsson’s quantum leap in scale from his usual domestics to the smooth human and urban landscape that met him on his voyage, one can imagine that the leap in scale for urban dwellers is immense in the Icelandic context of endlessly stretching horizons. The profound proportional dynamics of scale between man and the man-made on one hand, and the vastness of the landscape and its powers on the other, are instantly experienced by the human body. The powers of nature are not only destructive and sublime, but also unpredictable, which adds temporal uncertainty to the perceived situation. Will it snow in the afternoon of a sunlit summer

morning? Will all plans be shattered by a blizzard, fog or even an eruption?

The quality of this feature of the landscape is transcultural and immensely personal at the same time, a heterochronic situation that might lead to a wake-up call directed at all the senses to build up a new personal frame of reference and understanding, striating in one's own manner the sensing of a place by a multitude of sensory inputs, smelling, hearing, reinventing a code of language that has nothing to do with words or top-down asserted cultural values. And much like Saigon, the multi-sensory and ever-changing situation of Icelandic nature may then have a power to make one linger in that state of limbo of self-re-discovery.

TRAVELLING TO – WITHOUT MOVING FROM – THE MOST TREASURED DESTINATION OF THEM ALL

As previously mentioned, travellers are still in many cases kept on a strict program, leaving very little flexibility between the (sometimes way too many) previously established 'points of interests' and often too little time to explore them properly or enjoyably (Veijola & Jokinen 1994). In any given situation, heavily scheduled itineraries seem to underline the impossibility and irrelevance of deep, holistic, emotional experiences as the emphasis is directed towards accumulating the maximum number of 'must-see' destinations and sights.

In my capacity as a guide, I found that the most treasured moments of the tours were often completely unorganized, unforeseen everydayish happenings in the extraordinary setting offered by a random place in nature, when time had the opportunity to win over space, and ambiance, mood or chance 'appropriated' a certain moment. Obviously, the sublime characteristics and emotional impact of certain settings or destinations

can be of interest, but is it really the size of the collection of postcard-places that forms the core value of the traveling experience? Do we *really* care so much whether we see that particular mountain or that lake – taking the thrill of witnessing a specific natural phenomenon for the first time out of the equation?

Should we instead give greater attention to regard the temporal points of visit, addressing other senses than the eyes, where the tour frame is intuition-based rather than organized around recognizable visual attractions? To be sure, in the last twenty years we have seen a much more varied spectrum of travel in Iceland, intertwining culture and nature, even going to the lengths of organizing travels and experience around central natural/political discourses. This is important, supplementing in varied ways the types of service where the striated visitor simply checks her boxes of predefined must-sees, giving more recognition to the other type of traveling that this country undoubtedly has great potential to accommodate: A space for the haptic traveller, the living in the now, the chance to reinstall, re-sense and recollect the inner frames of reference.

Perhaps this should be a point of reference to a much greater aspect of the services and offers provided by the travel industry, giving the collection of experiences more importance in their qualitative terms. Obviously, this is more difficult to plan and striate in the traditionally accepted quantitative terms of sale and marketing as it cannot easily be calculated, planned or prescheduled, but does not make it unimportant.

THE VOYAGE THROUGH THE GATE OF THE NOW

I hope to have argued the great importance of acknowledging and embracing the quality of the heterochronic state described above, as we plan and map the quality of

local nature-based tourism. We should also be cautious of the alarming and suffocating elements in the striated reality of the marketing scene and the over-exploitation of fragile ground, and rather understand the multitude of values and qualities that can influence each voyage. We must give the traveller time and space to let her body move with the soul, thereby bringing her through the gates of nature to the destination that so many seek; to the now – and through the gate of now, to herself.

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